

Washington Post, December 5, 2010

By Robert McCartney

When it comes to something as basic as ensuring that our drinking water doesn't poison our children, you'd think federal scientists and environmentalists would hustle to give the public the fullest and most reliable information as quickly as possible.

You'd also think the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Environmental Protection Agency would go out of their way to publicize it when the government's own research finds that the risk posed by lead in the water nationwide is greater than previously described, and that one of the EPA's top recommended solutions is useless.

You'd be wrong.

Those are two important lessons to be drawn from Wednesday's release of a CDC report on the 2004 crisis of lead in the water in the District. In the official research paper, the nation's premier public health agency finally confirmed in full scientific detail that it completely bungled its initial work, which tried to minimize the risk in the water.

I'm glad that the CDC ended years of denial and stonewalling. But its credibility suffered considerably because it took so long and acted only under sustained pressure from safe-water advocates, the media and Congress.

"They were too quick to publish a flawed study and they were too slow to retract it, when they knew that others were relying on it," said Rep. Brad Miller (D-N.C.), chairman of a House subcommittee that issued a blistering report in May of the CDC's handling of the issue.

Moreover, the CDC and EPA have done virtually nothing this week to alert the public about the report even though it raises major questions about government policies on lead pipes used in 3 million to 6 million households nationwide.

The report contains two troubling findings. First, it says that young children and expectant mothers are at elevated risk of lead poisoning if they live in homes served by lead pipes, regardless of the age of the housing and even if the water in the system as a whole is considered safe by EPA standards.

Basically, that puts in question the safety of drinking water in numerous houses in older neighborhoods in cities including Washington, Chicago, Detroit and Providence, R.I.

"What it does is say that the EPA lead in water standard is not itself sufficient to stop higher incidence of blood lead in children," said Marc Edwards, the award-winning Virginia Tech environmental engineering professor who spearheaded the long campaign that ultimately forced the CDC to reverse itself.

When exposed to lead, young children risk suffering diminished IQ. The main threat in old homes comes from lead in paint and dust, and the added danger posed by water is subtle and hard to quantify. But the new report says it's real.

"We need public education," Edwards said. "It's not a cause for panic, but that change in the CDC message is very profound."

Edwards suggested that residents of District homes served by lead pipes follow D.C. Water's recommendations to have their water tested. If the household includes children younger than 6,

it'd be wise to use filtered or bottled water, or at least flush the pipes for a couple of minutes before drinking.

The CDC report also confirmed something that Edwards and other experts concluded years ago: It does no good to replace just some lead pipes serving a home. It's necessary to remove them all to be sure of solving the problem.

Many specialists, including some at the EPA, believe partial replacements actually make the problem worse, at least temporarily. That's partly because the work can dislodge lead particles within the pipes.

The implications of the new finding are potentially staggering. They suggest that the EPA, which officially supports partial lead-pipe replacements, has been giving bad and costly advice since 1991 despite growing pressure to alter its position.

For instance, under EPA guidance, the District spent \$97 million for 17,000 replacements. Of those, 15,000 were the partial variety found to be worthless at best.

To its credit, D.C. Water sharply reduced partial replacements in 2008. It decided they were aggravating the problem. An exception is made when such work is necessary to fix broken pipes, in which case D.C. Water pays for lead monitoring and filters.

Recommending partial replacements is "still part of the [EPA] rule, in spite of this fairly large and extensive field test in Washington, D.C., that indicates it doesn't work," D.C. Water General Manager George S. Hawkins said.

"That rule ought to be changed Monday," he said.

As of Friday afternoon, however, despite requests from journalists, the EPA hadn't commented.

Miller, who heads the investigations and oversight subcommittee of the House Science and Technology Committee, said he suspected that the CDC took so long to issue its report partly because of the human instinct "to be slow to admit error." Miller also faulted a tendency in government agencies to want to reassure the public even when the facts warranted otherwise.

"There has been a tendency . . . to kind of pat people's hands and say everything's fine when there are real questions about whether the public health is being endangered by environmental exposures," Miller said. However, he added, government's proper role "is to tell people the Lord's own truth. And if that causes people to worry, then they should worry."

I dislike promoting public anxiety, but amen to that.